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SHAKSPERE IN THE SCHOOLS¹

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Those of us whose school days are three decades or more away remember that it was in the Fifth and Sixth Readers that we "found" Shakspeare. Some of us may have found him in fragments in the *Beauties of Shakspeare*, compiled by the ill-fated Mr. Dodd. Some of us, given to the literary adventure of browsing, may have found him paraphrased but connected in Lamb's *Tales*, and, if we were hardy pioneers, or suggestible to wise counsel, we may even have read him in some leather-bound edition of *Shakspeare's Complete Works*. If we had imagination, a reasonable amount of linguistic aptitude, and persistence, we may have read a number of the plays, stirred by the poetry and the declamation, sensing dimly the tragedy and the wisdom, though seldom the humor, and feeling that the experience was somehow vaguely doing us good. But this was what the pedagogues now call an "extra-school activity," seldom instigated by any hint given us in school. So far as the schools were concerned, the only literary diet furnished was the school readers; and for the compilers of these useful museums Shakspeare was only a quarry from which to gather specimens for reading aloud.

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I have before me, as I write, Swan's *District School Reader*, printed in Boston, 1846. Its preface, brief and definite, explains that the book is "designed for the highest classes in public and private schools." The reading lessons, "consisting of descriptive, narrative, dramatic, and didactic pieces, contain just moral sentiments, and present such varieties of style as are necessary to teach good reading." The rhetoricians might quarrel with this classification, the educator might find the educational aim a little vague, but the moralist must approve the preference given to "just moral sentiments." Our ancestors had no false shame and no tactical reserves about the avowal of their interest in the moral improvement of the young.

The book contains 170 "Lessons," under each of which are given one or more "pieces" to read (aloud, of course); in all a collection of about 300 specimens devoted to clinical uses. The first 72 "Lessons" are, if the note at the head of each is to be trusted, mainly instruction in enunciation, rising by easy stages from drill in the so-called long *ā*, as in *fāte*, *hāte*, etc., to such ambitious feats as *curb*, *curb'd*, *curbd'st*, and on up to the heights of *dazzle*, *dazzl'd*, *dazzld'st*. After this conscientious pursuit of the technique of articulate utterance, comes a smaller group of lessons dealing with the grave and serious topic of "Pauses." The impetuous youth is told quite definitely when to "pause": "After the nominative when it consists of more than one word"; "before an adjective when it follows the noun." I feel a twinge of regret at having been born too late to hear this in practice. "Everything is educative," commented one of my colleagues, after hearing a particularly muddled and futile address. Inflection, Emphasis, Quantity, each has a brief quota of lessons devoted to it, and then, from Lesson 95 on, the youth is thrust forth into the open sea of the remaining lessons, with his previous instructions for chart and compass.

The choice of authors for the book is wide, not to say catholic. Among the 112 in the Table of Contents are Hannah More, Prentice, Akenside, Audubon, Congreve, Wordsworth, Milton. And Shakspere? Yes; and properly enough his entrance is effectively staged, viz., at the apex of the articulatory efforts, Lesson 72, on *dazzled'st*, etc. Here, in the company of Thomson, Cowper, Congreve,

Campbell, and Scott, Shakspeare contributes (through what characters we are not told),

Now my co-mates and brothers in exile,

clear through to his discovery of "good in everything," and the four lines from *Henry VI* beginning,

What stronger breastplate than a heart untainted. . . .

One can hear the younger readers, with who knows what forensic aspirations, looking well to the full values of the palatals and dentals and sibilants as they read—

"*Finds tongues* in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones and good in everything."

Lesson 85 does better: in appearance it is dramatic, not forensic. It contains the whole dialogue in which Prince Arthur pleads with Rupert for his eyes. Let us hope that the poignant suspense of the scene led the readers to forget the admonition at the beginning of the lesson: "When two questions are connected by the disjunctive *or*, the first usually has the rising, and the second the falling inflection." Lesson 86 enjoins that "for the tone of mockery, sarcasm, or irony, the circumflex or wave should be used." Shakspeare comes in here for two lines:

Queen: Hamlet, you have your father much offended.

Hamlet: Madame, yôu have my father much offended.

Did the readers wonder who the Queen and Hamlet were, or what they were talking about? Did the teachers tell them? Lessons 113 to 116, again, are better; two of them, indeed, perilously theatrical. First, we have the quarrel of Brutus and Cassius entire; then Antony's speech, with the irrelevant mob and the by-play, of course, omitted: so fine a speech should not be interrupted, except by the conventional "applause and cheers." Then come Cassius' tempting of Brutus, and Othello's defense before the potent, grave, and reverend seigniors of Venice. Finally, Lesson 137 gives the dialogue between Wolsey and Cromwell, containing, as we see, many of the "just moral sentiments" promised in the preface.

Not one of these extracts is explained by information or comment. Even the poor satisfaction of knowing the name of the play

is disallowed. The motives and identity of the speakers, the circumstances and significance of the action, remain dark things. The selections are fragments, poetic and declamatory, conveying little hint of their significance as a part of some organized whole; and we can safely infer that they are not provocative of interest in the dangerous allurements of the stage. Indeed, we were not then a theater-going people. Our instinct for public expression was satisfied mostly by the sermon and the speech. So it is mainly for forensic ends that there were chosen such Shakspearean and other literature as found a place in these old school readers.

Another popular "Reader," Sargent's, ten years later, carries these same interests to a quite incredible point. It contains an introduction of 54 pages in small print devoted to the minutiae of the technique of reading aloud. The literary selections of the book are divided into three classes, "prose, poetry, and dialogue," and Shakspeare does, at least, get included in this last class. But there is the same indifference to the part of the "dialogues" in working out any unified story. For example, the reader comes upon Adam and Orlando talking. They seem about to take a trip somewhere; whither and why the reader is left to glean as he may, nor is he told the name of the play. But the schoolboy of the day was, let us hope, properly edified by Adam's youthful prudence in not applying hot and rebellious liquors to his blood; for at this date the temperance movement was well under way.

These two samples of the place of Shakspeare in schools two generations ago are quite representative, as further examination of the textbooks shows. People still believed in the virtue of oratory, still regarded it as an avenue to prominence in public life. They gave little thought to the possibility of achieving an education, either in school or college, through the study of English literature, although cultivated men and women were reading the poets, essayists, and novelists of England and America, old and recent. Few of them were theater-goers; we were not yet an urban population, and the stage was looked upon by many intelligent and fairly educated people with grave disapproval. So, with the tradition still unchallenged that Shakspeare is the greatest of English poets, he had to be included in the school readers, but represented mainly

by the declamatory passages suited to reading aloud and public "recitation." As a playwright he could have no place in the educational scheme.

The second phase of the study of Shakspeare in the schools is quite a different thing. It dates back only about thirty years. It is best represented in the school editions of Hudson and Rolfe, if indeed these two editions are not mainly responsible for the movement. Certainly their texts were widely used. Shakspeare now appears as a writer of plays, complete units, stories in dramatic form with beginning, middle and end. Striking speeches and spirited dialogue are not detached declamatory efforts, but significant parts, high lights, in the scenes that make up the action. The story is mainly a means for the development of character. The portrayal of character, in contrasts, in its relation to motive and action, in its psychologic insight, is more interesting than the dramatic clash or the spectacular scene. Hamlet is a study in psychology, and the question as to his madness a by-product of this interest. The mind of Brutus is contrasted with those of Cassius and Antony. The harangues of these men are studied for their intellectual bent and rhetorical skill.

But even more important than the psychological interest is the ethical. It was the age, be it remembered, when we were reading George Eliot. Problems such as Hamlet's responsibility to avenge, Macbeth's degree of guilt prior to the opening of the play, and Lady Macbeth's culpability, occupied much time. Was Macbeth a study of a good man led astray by a combination of good fortune, general approbation, malignant witches, and a wicked wife? What did the witches symbolize: Macbeth's evil desire objectified, or real maleficent forces of evil such as do exist to the danger of one's soul? Was Brutus to blame, morally, for entering the conspiracy? And is the tragic end of him and his cause a sanction of the law against murder? What was the tragic fault of Othello? Was it credulity or irascibility, or was he punished for a runaway match? And what was Desdemona's guilt: weakness, or timorous fibbing? And Cordelia: Was she not too proud, too unyielding? Was not her punishment too great? Once in this field of speculation, there was literally no end—and no route. One might wander anywhere,

giving himself to any sort of "random provocations" that his ethical bias suggested. In this view Shakspeare's plays become a sort of literary "moral science," his characters *exempla*, his stories parables, himself a philosopher and omniscient. I do not exaggerate. I have heard such teaching of Shakspeare both in schools and colleges.

This interpretative and speculative study goes back for its origins to various sources: to Coleridge, to Dowden, to Schlegel and Gervinus and numerous other German critics. It flowered in the sentimental inventions of Mrs. Jameson. It attains its maddest pinnacle, perhaps, in the three volumes of comment by Denton J. Snider, an ardent Hegelian of the St. Louis (Missouri) school. For him, Shakspeare is a moral and philosophical writer, whose function was to illustrate the Hegelian categories of family, state, etc. In his view, Beatrice is "an unlovely, sarcastic female, who rails at marriage." This kind of study fitted in well with the tendency to be ethically-minded in the presence of literature, and with that heavy seriousness of the school-teacher which has made compulsory education seem to many spirited children a species of premeditated and tyrannous insult. Moreover, it was fatally easy. It required no scholarship, merely a sort of facility in debate and a proclivity to sermonizing. Its elements were only the commonplace ethical experiences of daily life.

I should misrepresent the two well-known editors cited above if I did not add that their editions contained, besides the citations of moral reflections from the critics, a great deal of valuable apparatus. They included notes on the dates of the plays, information as to the various texts, explanations of words and phrases new to the readers, passages from the sources, sure or probable, that Shakspeare had used, illustrations (in Rolfe) of Tudor architecture, theatrical and general, and occasionally some great actor's conception of one of the *dramatis personae*. In fact, considering the interests of contemporary scholarship, they were good editions. I am speaking of what the schools did with Shakspeare, and how they used their material, rather than recounting what material they had at hand.

A little later, but still in the same period, arose an interest in the study of the technique of the drama. Someone discovered

Freytag. Many teachers fell upon the book rapturously, albeit as funeral baked meats; for few of them read the original. But here was something definite, having a fine flavor of analytic scholarship, an opportunity in dialectics, and, like the ethical study, not entailing the burden of scholarship. It became a game to discover where the *crisis* of the hero's fortunes occurred. Was it where Desdemona dropped the handkerchief, or where Emilia picked it up, or where Iago got it from her, or somewhere else? It was thrilling to be able to fix the crisis of *Julius Caesar* in the middle of the play, almost exactly so by count of lines. It was an exhilarating exercise of ingenuity to fit into the mosaic of a perfect technique such passages as those of the drunken sailors in *The Tempest*, Hamlet's long interview with the players, the long, resounding declamation of rulers and soldiers (people with the insidious habit of being listened to) and all the rich prolixity of which the Elizabethan dramatists and their audiences seem to have been so fond. Shakspeare ever garrulous? Heresy and irreverence! His technique must be proved compact, necessary, perfect; clean, concise, rightly directed as the cuts of a surgeon's knife. School editions appeared with questions, scores and hundreds of questions, whose answer should explain and justify every turn of the action and even the finer shades of diction; Shakspeare was cross-examined by schoolboys, through editors, on aspects of the dramatist's craft that never entered his mind. Puzzling, indefinite too, were many of the questions; a favorite one was, "What is the effect of this word (or action)?"—a question answerable only by those who knew in advance the particular aesthetic or philosophic squint of the questioner. Of course, this study was not all foolish, though much of it was inevitably so. It often led the pupils to see the relations of the parts, the fitness between character and action, the leading up to a fine dramatic effect, and the essential human interest in a scene or play.

At the same time, a great deal of attention was paid to the poetry. The melody of the verse, the beauty and fitness of the imagery, and the suggestiveness of the words were noted. Pupils were encouraged to commit fine passages to memory, and were even shown the recurrence of certain well-known expressions in other

literature and in common speech. This was also the period of the development of philological study in the colleges. It was likely to be impressed upon college students that the diction of Shakspeare had to be learned thoroughly, perhaps etymologically also. A certain amount of this teaching inevitably filtered into the high schools through the recent college graduates who taught in them. Such exhaustive study of the diction seldom lasted long enough to do much harm; seldom, I fear, long enough to make the high-school pupils read their texts with full understanding. For against the impact of too much exact information most boys and girls are well armored. They can defeat and discourage the most pertinacious pedantry.

On the whole, this second period, though misguided as to some important things, and for the most part missing the essentials, was more good than bad. It did make pupils think, did impress them with respect for the greatness of Shakspeare, did leave with them some appreciation of his qualities as a poet.

The schools have recently, within a decade or two, entered upon a new kind of Shakspearean study—the dramaturgic; not, of course, the tracing of Shakspeare's development in dramaturgic skill, not studying the development of the drama from its earlier forms up to his time; but the study of his plays as dramas, written to be acted. This interest is directly traceable to three sources: the advanced studies from this point of view made by university professors of English, the interest in various forms of dramatic activity in the schools, both for instruction and recreation, and the large increase in popular knowledge of the theater.

A growing number of the teachers in high schools have had not only a college course but at least a year of graduate study. Several states now require the A.M. degree in their appointees. A considerable number of the younger among these teachers have taken graduate courses in dramatic literature, in which the plays were studied from the dramaturgic point of view, and not merely as to their sources, their parallels, and their diction. Naturally, these students tend to present Shakspeare as they have come to see him.

The reaction in the schools in favor of reality and against meaningless wordmongering has led, also, to a wide use of dramatic

action. In the lower grades simple stories are dramatized in the reading lessons; little plays, sometimes made up by the children, are given; folk-dances and festivals involving dramatic elements are widely popular; and in the high schools there are more ambitious efforts, including the presentation of modern comedies and even complete Shakspearean dramas. In a visit to one famous school I saw two groups of boys spiritedly rehearsing, one group the play of the "rude mechanicals" in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, and another (in Latin) the *Captives* of Plautus. Many of the better schools have had in recent years, as their main Commencement exercise, a complete out-of-door performance of some Shakspearean play. Their programs have included *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and others. A number of the larger towns in the West have come to regard such exercises as a legitimate and regular part of the high-school work; and one at least of these towns has built a municipal theater largely under the inspiration and for the occasional accommodation of the high-school plays. So frequent, indeed, are these high-school presentation of Shakspeare that they are assuming the status of an institution.

The relation of all this to our increasing interest in the theater is obvious. The old prejudice against theatergoing is as dead as the condemnation of novel-reading. What part the moving pictures may have had in furthering this general interest in dramatic things, or how far they may now be getting in the way of the spoken drama, I do not know. But I am sure that they have helped to dispel any lingering prejudice against entertainments whose purpose is to tell a story through action. A potent influence in arousing an interest in the drama among the schools has been the open-air performances and the "historic" presentations of Shakspeare that purport to be like the original. Here was something to catch the "school man." It had a fine scholarly sound: it would make flexible a conscience that was too stiff toward pleasure in school. So, also, the pageants in celebration of local history or great historic anniversaries showed how to combine the pleasures of mimicry and pageantry with instruction.

All this has, of course, affected the treatment of Shakspeare in the schoolroom. Even if the teachers were unchanged, the pupils

would be a little more likely to think of a play as possessing dramatic possibilities.

It is noticeable, particularly at the period of the tercentenary of Shakspeare's death, that the interest in the historical background has much increased. A high-school class is not so likely now to be left with certain generalizations about the glories of the Renaissance, the revival of learning, the development of nationalism in England. They will probably consider, instead, such matters as the housing, clothing, work, and recreations of the Elizabethan people; the construction of the theaters, the size, shape, and lighting of the stage, the character, arrangement, and behavior of the audiences, the kinds of plays that were in favor, the significance of allusions that Shakspeare makes to contemporary interests and follies, the attitude of the Puritans toward the theaters, and the restrictions put upon the actors. In this historical study they will have the help of pictures, and, it is to be hoped, an attractive collection of the books that bring Tudor England before our eyes. They will be told that one must know the meaning of the words to understand the plays as Shakspeare's audiences did, and that this is a matter of no great difficulty if they will use the glossary with their texts. They will discuss motives, situations, suspenses, climaxes, "tragic coils," complication and unraveling of plots, indications of character, with reference to the dramatic interest. They will read aloud a good deal, not as actors, but as persons who understand what the ideas and the emotions are which an actor would convey. Instead of studying minutely only two or three plays—and these required for college entrance—many schools now read eight or ten.

Of course, I am sketching the aims of the present teaching of Shakspeare, not listing its accomplishments. We fall short in our attainments, as we always must when our ideals are high enough.

What are the schools really accomplishing? They don't know exactly; they never do know just how effective their work is in any field; probably they never can. They must rest their self-approbation on a mixture of evidence, conjecture, and faith. Certainly, pupils won't forget quite all that they have learned—at least, not all of them will. Probably we are right in believing that contact with great poetry and great drama has a civilizing effect;

some highly civilized peoples have thought so. The boys of one school who gave a Shakspearean play used to be heard chaffing each other on the athletic field in phrases taken from the play; they were at least increasing their linguistic resources. I am inclined to think the new emphasis upon the historical setting of the plays particularly valuable. We Americans are charged with having too much contemporaneity, of living too exclusively in the present. The charge is true; that it is more true of us than of other peoples I am not sure. But I am sure of the principle behind this criticism. A mental outfit that lacks all historic background is thin, flat; its owner accepts his "values" uncritically because he lacks the means of comparison.

Still, uncertainty dogs us. Do we really know what our pupils are getting from their study of Shakspeare? Tens of thousands of them, in the past ten years, have read carefully at least *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Macbeth*. These are great touchstones, both as literature and as drama. Has this study made firm a body of good taste large enough to improve the popular reading and to elevate the popular drama? Has it inspired in many the wish to read other plays of Shakspeare? I fear the librarians and the dramatic critics would not be enthusiastic in their answers. It is not well to expect too much. Many of these pupils have never seen a Shakspearean play ably presented. Many readers cannot, even by earnest effort, construct a full scene in their imaginations. The book and the play that make no tax on the faculties are the line of least resistance that most of us always choose for our recreation, and that all of us sometimes choose. None the less, we shall, I hope, continue to teach Shakspeare in the schools for the sake of those who do understand and enjoy. They are, after all, the people most worth our efforts.